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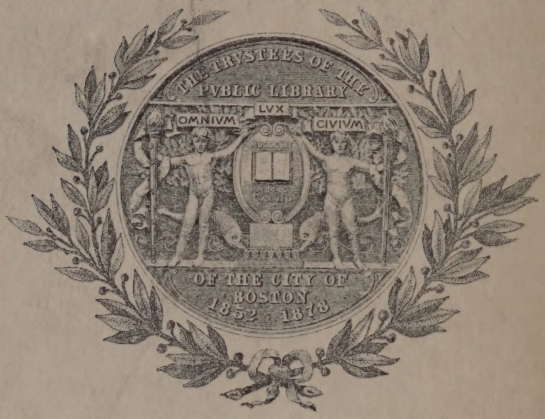
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WAR NOT INEVITABLE

BY

HON. JOHN W. FOSTER

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WAR NOT INEVITABLE

By Hon. JOHN W. FOSTER
EX-SECRETARY OF STATE

I have been asked to speak on the topic, "War not Inevitable," and to illustrate it from the history of our own country.

At the very threshold of the consideration of such a subject the question presents itself: Is it reasonable to expect peace among the nations of the earth, and is it practicable to maintain such peace? I fear that the prevailing answer to these questions would be in the negative. Among even the most enlightened and Christian nations is there not a predominant sentiment that war is not only inevitable, but that sometimes it is necessary?

The substitute for or preventive of war, arbitration, is held to be merely a method of adjusting minor international differences, and it is contended that political questions involving national policy, honor, or territory should not be relegated to a tribunal however exalted, but that in the extreme resort they must be determined by the arbitrament of war.

Besides, there are many who claim that war is not an unmixed evil; that it stimulates patriotism; that it makes men more virile; that it reduces a redundant population; that it is a healthy stimulus among nations; that decay and disintegration are the fate of nations which do not maintain a state of preparedness for war.

Writers of the history of nations, the chroniclers of wars, and most statesmen are inclined to take one or more of the foregoing pessimistic views of the relations of states to each other.

Address at the New England Peace Congress, Hartford, Conn., May 11, 1910

An Englishman, one of the most intelligent writers on questions of the Far East, the recent storm center of war, in a late work on "The Coming Struggle in Eastern Asia," uses this language: "The sterilization begotten of a long peace is as much the nemesis of a nation as the vainglory of a Napoleon who threw himself to the other extreme. Moderation in war and moderation in peace is the line along which the successful nation must necessarily progress. It is impossible to conceive of a world presided over by international lawgivers, such as is the strange ideal of some. To succeed in realizing such dreams it would first be necessary to emasculate mankind. War is necessary to mankind. All history shows it to be inevitable."

A senator of the United States, one of the most prominent and influential members of that high legislative body, was recently approached with a view to securing his coöperation in a movement for the establishment of a permanent international tribunal of arbitral justice, such as was proposed at the last Hague Peace Conference. The report to me of the gentleman who conferred with the senator is as follows: "The senator pooh-poohed the idea of a permanent, judicial, and binding court of arbitration. He said the war expenditures were trivial (except pensions, which cannot be touched), and that the United States would never agree to refer questions involving the honor or territory of this country to any court of arbitration; that the people would never tolerate such a suggestion for a moment."

Do this British author and this American statesman represent any considerable body of public sentiment among our Anglo-American peoples? If so, the friends of international peace have a serious task before them in converting the English-speaking world to a policy of peace and goodwill among the nations. Our history shows that war is popular with the masses of our people. The conduct of our legislators and public men in times of controversy with foreign governments has been largely controlled by their knowledge that the great body of the people would approve heartily a call to arms. Hence the

important work before us is to seek to create a strong public sentiment hostile to war. It is apparent that at present it does not exist in our country.

Let us examine the assertions that war is inevitable and sometimes necessary. We have been accustomed to look upon the contests of past ages as inspired by the spirit of conquest or entered upon under trivial pretexts and without reason, to satisfy the whims of autocratic or ambitious rulers; but that since the nations of Europe and America have assumed the form of constitutional and representative governments they have not appealed to arms except for alleged grave reasons of state involving the honor and high interests of the countries concerned. The United States, since it attained its independence, has been in three foreign wars. These were entered upon under the constitutional requirement of an express vote of Congress. It may throw some light upon the subject we are discussing if we inquire how far these three wars were inevitable or necessary.

I premise by saying that the Revolutionary War was a revolt from the mother country, and therefore does not fall within the category of foreign wars; and yet, if the controversy which occasioned it had arisen in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in place of the eighteenth, there would have been no necessity for it. More than fifty years ago, when there was considerable agitation in Canada for independence or annexation to the United States, the *London Times*, reflecting the sentiments of the government and people of Great Britain, used this positive language: "We have been taught wisdom by experience, and the most valuable as well as the most costly of our lessons has been taught by the barren issue of a conflict with a province which from remonstrance drifted to rebellion and crowned rebellion with independence. We should not go to war for the sterile honor of retaining a reluctant colony in subjection. We should not purchase an unwilling obedience by the outlay of treasure or blood." Should Canada to-day, resolutely and with a fair degree of unanimity, determine to set up

an independent government, it would meet with no armed opposition from Great Britain.

The War of 1812, our first foreign conflict, was far from being inevitable. While it was justifiable, according to the rules of international law, the better sentiment of the country was opposed to it. The President, Mr. Madison, did all in his power to prevent it, but he was overruled by a few fiery spirits in Congress known as the "War Hawks," Henry Clay and John C. Calhoun, then young men, being the leaders who played upon the sentiment of hostility at that time so fresh against England. The declaration of war was passed by Congress after a long and heated debate, a large minority vote being cast against it. Five days after this action, but unknown in America owing to the slow means of communication, the Orders in Council were repealed, and thus the main cause of the war was removed.

The fateful decision had been made, and Mr. Clay, the leader of the war party, predicted the conquest of Canada and that we would dictate peace at Quebec or Halifax. But our armies crossed the frontier only to be driven back in defeat, and though we gained some glory on the water, the conflict was barren of results, and we made peace without settling a single question about which we entered on the contest. Never was a war more fruitless in its conclusion. It was neither inevitable nor necessary.

It is the judgment of history that our second foreign war — that with Mexico — was provoked on our part, and that it was largely inspired by the spirit of slavery extension. Although the annexation of Texas, a revolted colony of Mexico, led to the armed contest, the immediate cause of the conflict was a disputed question of territory. Our government at the same time had a similar territorial question on our northwest coast with Great Britain even of a more heated character. The party which elected Mr. Polk to the presidency had declared for "fifty-four forty or fight"; that is, we must contend at the hazard of war for our extreme claim against England. But just

then the British had concluded a war with China, and had a strong army and a formidable navy which could be sent at once to the territory in dispute. Under such circumstances our government prudently decided to make terms with England, and surrendered our claim to more than half of the territory in dispute.

Our conduct with our weaker neighbor on the south was in marked contrast. Without waiting for the result of negotiations, President Polk, with no authority from Congress, sent an army under General Taylor to occupy the disputed territory, and thus precipitated a war which, as I have said, in the judgment of historians, almost without exception, has been pronounced not only unnecessary but unjustifiable. A book has recently appeared which is written with a view to reverse this judgment, but it furnishes new proofs to sustain the judgment, in the declaration of President Tyler, who brought about the annexation of Texas, that "the question of boundaries was purposely left open for negotiation," which he expected would be adjusted "by pacific arrangement"; and he accused his successor of having precipitated war by advancing Taylor's troops to the Rio Grande. Although the results of the war were greatly to the advantage of the United States, that does not change the fact that it was provoked on our part and was one of conquest and injustice.

The Civil War was domestic, not international, in its character, and hence not to be included in our present examination, but it may be remarked in passing that, though possibly the questions of the right of secession and the continued existence of slavery could not have been settled in the existing state of public sentiment except by a resort to arms, yet how much more economical it would have been to have purchased peace by paying the full value of every slave emancipated; and how many thousands of lives would have been saved, the wretched experience of reconstruction days have been avoided, and the bitterness and hate engendered by the fearful contest never have been created.

The war with Spain possessed some of the characteristics of that of 1812 with Great Britain. The President was strongly opposed to a resort to arms and struggled for peace to the last, but the feeling in Congress and the agitation in the press called loudly for hostilities. I entertain no doubt that the Spanish government would have granted at the end of the negotiations the demand of our government for the complete colonial autonomy of Cuba and practical independence such as Canada enjoys. But the ill-timed catastrophe of the explosion of the *Maine* in the harbor of Havana seemed to cause our people to lose their reason and led the President to intrust the issue to Congress, where it was hastily decided.

The cause of the destruction of the *Maine* has not yet been accurately ascertained. The Spanish government proposed that the question be submitted to an international court of inquiry, but our government declined the proposal, preferring to rely upon the report of our own navy officials. From my acquaintance with the Spanish people I have never been able to bring myself to believe that the catastrophe was caused by Spanish officials, or with their knowledge. There has been an almost criminal neglect on our part to raise the *Maine* whose wreck lies as an unsightly obstruction in the harbor of Havana, with the festering bodies of many scores of gallant men denied a soldier's burial. From my conversation with officers of high rank in the navy, I am inclined to the belief that our delinquency in this respect is occasioned by the fear that it would be found that the destruction was caused by an internal explosion, and that the war was precipitated by an event for which the Spanish government was in no wise responsible.

The *Maine* disaster was not the declared object of the war, but the independence of Cuba; and diplomacy to that end had not exhausted its resources when Congress took action. President Taft has recently declared it to have been an altruistic war. That is true, but how far one nation is justified in imposing upon another through its army and navy its ideas of political morality and government is an open question. Our

experience with Cuba, Porto Rico, and the Philippines in the last ten years has presented to us in a new light some of the embarrassments Spain had to contend with in the government of those islands, and has created a division of sentiment among us as to the wisdom of assuming responsibility for their government. But it is historically correct to assert that the war was forced upon Spain by us, and that it might easily have been avoided with honor.

The Spanish War has demonstrated the evil effects of an aggressive war, entered upon without proper deliberation, under the whip and spur of undue public excitement. If before that war was declared Spain had offered to transfer to us the island of Porto Rico for one fourth or one fifth of the cost of that war, we would not have accepted the offer. We would have said that the island was of little or no strategic importance, and would be an element of weakness rather than strength to our continental territory; that the people were without experience in government, without sympathy with our institutions, of different race, language, and religion, very ignorant and of a low grade of morality, a people whom it would require generations of time to assimilate with us; that, so far from shedding one drop of American blood for their acquisition, we would find the island a constant expense and incubus, and we should have declined even its free gift. Much less would we have accepted the Philippines on the other side of the globe, if offered us before the war, for one half of the hundreds of millions which it cost us, with a population even more objectionable than that of Porto Rico, largely pagan and Mohammedan, a territory which would be an element of weakness in time of war and a heavy expense in peace.

So, too, it might have cooled the warlike ardor of many an American taxpayer to have been told that the war upon which we were about to enter would end in the permanent enlargement of our military establishment, that our navy would seek rivalry with the greatest nations of Europe, and that our annual expenses for military purposes would amount to seventy-two

per cent of the entire government expenditures. These considerations, with others of a like nature, if they had been properly and calmly examined by the people of the United States, might have led our Congress to delay, if not forego, the acts which inaugurated the hostilities against Spain. We never can tell to what extremities a foreign war may lead us.

The examination of the detailed facts attending the origin of our foreign wars shows that in every case the initial step attending hostilities was taken by us, that they were not inevitable, and that they all might have been avoided with honor. And the same may be said of almost all wars of modern times, especially those between civilized and Christian nations. Secretary Elihu Root has well stated the situation in his address at the laying of the corner-stone of the building for the Bureau of the American Republics, when he said: "There are no international controversies so serious that they cannot be settled peaceably if both parties really desire peaceable settlement; while there are few causes of dispute so trifling that they cannot be made the occasion of war if either party really desires war. The matters in dispute between nations are nothing; the spirit which deals with them is everything."

The truth of Mr. Root's assertion has been well illustrated in our relations with Great Britain, and the history of these relations shows how easy it is for nations to avoid war if they desire to do so. If we review the relations of the two countries since our independence, we shall find that almost every possible question of controversy of an international character has arisen between them, some of them of the most irritating and threatening character, and yet in only one instance did they fail of a peaceful and honorable settlement. It may be profitable to note some of these events.

Soon after our treaty of peace and independence in 1783, serious trouble arose respecting the execution of its stipulations, and the angry controversy threatened to again open hostilities. But President Washington adopted the extraordinary course of sending our Chief Justice, John Jay, to London as a special

plenipotentiary. A treaty was signed, but so strongly was it opposed at home that it was approved by the Senate by a bare constitutional majority. By its terms matters which could not otherwise be adjusted were referred to arbitration commissioners.

I have already discussed the facts attending the War of 1812, and shown that in this single instance in which we have resorted to war with Great Britain it was brought on by our own precipitate action, and might have been avoided with honor.

In 1817, when General Jackson invaded Florida, and seized and hung two British subjects, the state of public feeling in England was so intense that the Minister for Foreign Affairs stated that war might have been declared "if the Ministry had but held up a finger." But our government had the manliness to disavow the act and the war cloud passed.

The contention respecting the northeastern boundary between Maine and Canada was for many years the subject of angry controversy. At one time the armed forces of the two adjoining sections were so near to opening hostilities that it was necessary to dispatch General Scott to the scene, backed by the authority of the federal government, to quell the excitement and prevent open war. In time a peaceful settlement was found by the special British plenipotentiary sent to Washington and Secretary Webster.

Not long afterwards a similar controversy arose over the northwest boundary. A president was elected upon a platform demanding our extreme territorial pretension, with the campaign cry of "fifty-four forty or fight." But after the excitement of the campaign was past, the Secretary of State and the British minister, in the calm domain of diplomacy, sought and found a middle course which brought peace with honor.

We all remember the "Trent" affair during our Civil War, when, with the angry passions of that fratricidal strife at their height, our Congress and people went wild with commendation of the illegal act of our heroic naval commander, and the British army and navy were promptly put in battle array to resent the insult to their flag. But President Lincoln and Secretary Seward

pursued the only honorable course, acknowledged the error, released the Confederate prisoners, and the danger was over.

The history of that critical period in the life of our nation contains a narrative of the trials through which we passed in our relations with Great Britain, when our representative, Charles Francis Adams, declared to the Ministry that the conduct of their government relative to the Confederate cruisers meant war, and gave the warning that after our domestic strife was over we should hold their government responsible for its unfriendly course in the hour of our distress. On the return of peace, when the "Alabama claims" were pressed and a settlement by arbitration was proposed, the answer of the Ministry then in power was that the matter involved the dignity of the British Crown and the honor of the British nation, and that these could not be made the subject of arbitration. But after the passions awakened by the war had subsided and a new Ministry was called to power in Great Britain, the question of national honor disappeared and the matters in dispute were referred to arbitration. There is no more illustrious page in the annals of America or Great Britain than the record of the Geneva arbitration tribunal.

The settlement of the northwest boundary by the treaty of 1846, owing to want of geographical knowledge or accuracy of language, was followed by a dispute as to San Juan Island, which was being colonized by both American and Canadian settlers. Angry controversy arose and armed strife was threatened, which was only allayed by again dispatching General Scott to the disputed territory. After various attempts at adjustment by diplomacy extending through a series of years, the question was submitted to the arbitration of the emperor of Germany, who rendered a decision in favor of the United States.

Only a few years ago the Alaskan boundary was the subject of conflicting claims and angry debates in legislative halls and the public press. We felt that our claim was so strong and our occupation so long that arbitration of the question was out of place. After diplomacy had exhausted its resources, the

question went finally to a joint commission, and by the award of the British judge the claim of the United States was sustained.

From the very foundation of our government the Northeast fisheries have been a subject of irritation and dispute. It is one of the troublesome questions to adjust in the negotiations resulting in the treaty of peace and independence of 1783. Time and again vain efforts have been made to settle it by treaty stipulations. Almost all of our great statesmen and diplomats during the past century and a quarter have participated in the attempts at settlement. Many of our vessels have been seized, and their officers and crews imprisoned and other summary treatment inflicted on them by the authorities of Canada and Newfoundland; and great indignation has been manifested in our country thereat. Finally this question, hoary with diplomatic age and parliamentary debate, has been referred to the arbitration of a Hague tribunal, and before the present year closes it is hoped that this specter of danger to the peace of the two nations will be forever laid at rest.

Every one of these questions of difference just mentioned possessed sufficient elements of honor, vital interests, or national concern to warrant their being *casus belli* if either of the parties thereto, as Mr. Root expressed it, had really desired war. And doubtless if we had sought settlement of any one of them by military force tens of thousands of patriots would have rushed to our standard to defend the interests of the country by slaughtering their kinsmen, and our legislators would have cheerfully voted appropriations of hundreds of millions of dollars to defend an interest not worth probably a tithe of the cost. What better illustration can we have of the wisdom of the policy of the peaceful settlement of international questions of difference pursued by the United States and Great Britain during the last hundred years? And if this policy may be so successfully followed by two proud nations which have so many intricate and irritating questions to settle, why may it not be followed with profit by and with other nations of the world?

These two governments have likewise furnished an illustrious example of successful naval disarmament. The close of the War of 1812 found a large naval armament of both nations on the Great Lakes. It was agreed that all of these should be removed, and that thereafter each government would limit itself to maintaining one vessel on each of the lower lakes and two on the upper lakes, the vessels not to exceed one hundred tons and to carry only one eighteen-pound cannon; and that thenceforth no vessels of war should be built on these lakes. Since the date of that agreement their shores have become the home of a vast population and their waters of an immense commerce, but there has been no need of a great navy to preserve the peace or protect that commerce.

Within the past few weeks we have had another illustration of the advantages of peaceful negotiations over threats of hostile conduct. Under the existing tariff act the President of the United States is empowered to impose by proclamation a heavy retaliation duty on the products of any country which discriminated unfairly against our commerce. It would have been easy for our President, under a strict interpretation of the law and of Canadian treaties, to have applied to our northern neighbors our maximum tariff, which would have inaugurated a commercial war of gigantic proportions very hurtful to the interests of both countries. But happily President Taft is a man of peace, and he invited the Canadian authorities to a conference which resulted in a harmonious arrangement satisfactory to both governments, and the vast commerce across the frontier continues undisturbed.

The review which I have made has shown that all the foreign wars in which we have engaged were brought on by our own precipitate action, that they were not inevitable, and that they might have been avoided by the exercise of prudence and conciliation. It also shows that it has been possible for us to live in peace with our nearest neighbor, with which we have the most extensive and intimate relations, the most perplexing and troublesome questions. Our history also shows that during our

whole life as an independent nation no country has shown toward us a spirit of aggression or a disposition to invade our territory. If such is the case, is it not time that every true patriot, every lover of his country and of its fair fame in the world, every friend of humanity, should strive to curb the spirit of aggression and military glory among our people and seek to create an earnest sentiment against all war?

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